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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PRETORIA 002709

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SUBJECT: LEKOTA'S ASSISTANT TALKS PARTY LEADERSHIP AND LOGISTICS

REF: PRETORIA 2650

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Classified By: DEPUTY POLITICAL COUNSELOR MADELINE Q. SEIDENSTRICKER FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

Summary

¶1. (C) Mosiuoa Lekota's personal assistant, Dr. Tseliso Phomane, talked with Poloff about the Congress of the People's (COPE) leadership situation and logistics ahead of the party's manifesto conference on December 13. Phomane was confident that Lekota would emerge as the party's leader following the conference and confirmed former President Thabo Mbeki is involved behind the scenes in the new party. If Lekota fails to win the leadership next week -- or fails to concede that the will of the party's delegates points to different leader for the party -- it could open up deep fissures within the organization that undermine its electoral prospects. End Summary.

Lekota's Assistant Discusses Lekota, Mbeki, and Logistics

¶2. (C) Mosiuoa Lekota's personal assistant said the former Defense Minister "has to be the leader" elected at the COPE manifesto launch beginning December 13. Tseliso Phomane, Lekota's self-described assistant, organizer, and health adviser, told Poloff at a lunch on December 11 that COPE would elect its party leadership on December 16 and that the results would reflect "the will of the delegates." As much as COPE's leadership believes the results must "emerge from the bottom up," however, Phomane said there will be guaranteed spots for Lekota, Phillip Dexter, and Smuts Ngonyama. (Note: Phomane did not say whether there would be a guaranteed spot for former Gauteng premier Sam Shilowa. Some journalists, notably those with the Sunday Independent, have speculated that a rift has emerged between Lekota and Shilowa. However, Shilowa continues to speak on behalf of the party and said this week that COPE would "win big" at the polls. End Note.) Phomane said that as the face of the party, Lekota is "who the people call and ask for, who the people want to lead the party."

¶3. (C) Phomane said COPE is consulting with Mbeki regularly but does not want that to be common knowledge because "Mbeki's legacy is very mixed." (Note: For more information

on Mbeki involvement see Reftel. End Note.) He said Mbeki supports COPE's leaders personally because "he is friends with them" and has provided input on policy documents and statements. By stressing that Lekota would be the leader of COPE, Phomane made it clear that a last minute surprise candidate -- such as Mbeki -- for the party leadership would be unlikely. (Note: In a separate conversation, President Unit policy analyst Thabileng Mothabi told Poloff that former Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka is likely to join the new party soon. End Note.)

¶4. (C) Phomane noted that COPE is having trouble finding a permanent home because the party has limited funds. He noted that the party was housed in an office in Sandton for two months, but has since been moving from building to building because it lacks the funds for a permanent place. Currently, COPE is working from an office near the Morningside Wedge shopping complex. He said he has been handling all the technical aspects of the party from the office, including the registration site for the manifesto conference beginning on December 12. Phomane noted that COPE was confident it would win the court case placed by the African National Congress (ANC) that claimed COPE's name infringed on the ANC's brand. (Note: Phomane proved correct as on December 12 the Pretoria High Court dismissed the application saying the COPE name does not convey that the party is actually the 1955 Congress of the People. End Note.) He also trumpeted the party's by-election results in Western Cape, saying that it was "amazing" a party only in existence for two months could organize such a positive outcome so quickly.

Comment

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¶5. (C) If Phomane's statements are correct, Lekota will emerge as COPE's leader next week. However, failure by Lekota to agree to election results should they go against him could rupture the young party and dim its electoral prospects. Phomane's remarks underscore how funding continues to be an issue for the party in terms of organizing a permanent office and setting up critical technical components for its campaign. If backers such as Mbeki and Mlambo-Ngcuka are as involved as has been rumored, the party may be able to use that political clout to attract support from donors in the business community.

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